AN APPROPRIATE PIETY

May 6, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Philippians 2:1-16
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them." -John 10:10b RSV)

"Beware of making a show of your religion" Jesus said. And that topic, public piety, is endlessly fascinating to us. We are both attracted to and repelled by public piety it seems.

Religious leaders consistently end up at the top of the ten most admired people in the world... and yet, William Buckley observes that the best way not to get invited back to another dinner party in New York... is to say "God" more than once.

There is something both compelling and repelling about it.

The late Charles Merrill Smith, a wise and witty Methodist, made all uf us laugh with his wonderful book, How to Become a Bishop Without Being Religious. It is satire, but like all good satire Smith's observations were grounded in reality.

The thesis of the book was simple:

"You can expect to be a successful clergyperson without being religious. But never forget that you cannot be a success without being pious." [p. 4]

Smith knew that the Christian Church is not insulated from a culture that values appearances far more than authenticity. He wrote in a time that growing a beard and wearing hair long could result in unemployment and family break-up.

In any event he advised ministers to discover a total life-style and public image that exuded piety.

In clothing, always dark suits over shaggy sport coats. "Who turns for spiritual counsel to a man in a tweed coat?"

Choice of attire, automobile, art and literature for the parsonage...

Readers Digest condensed books are safe... the Saturday Evening Post was best. Avoid modern art, and it goes without saying that anything remotely resembling the human body is out.

"Living the Inhibited Life" is very important, Smith said. "Your pleasures should not be of a vigorous nature. It is a pity that croquet is no longer popular for it is the ideal recreation for clergy. No one gets very excited about it, no one swears over a poor shot, it is inexpensive, and it doesn't work up a sweat." [p. 13]

Public piety is fascinating... People from other countries and cultures notice how publicly pious we are; how we pray publicly at the drop of a hat, at service club luncheons, football games and rodeos. Sinclair Lewis wrote about the corruption of public piety, long before the P.T.L. collapse, in Elmer Gantry. Near the end of that book, Gantry has finally made it; has climbed all the way up the ecclesiastical ladder, is pastor of a wealthy, successful and growing congregation, a member of Rotary, the country club and is even taking golf lessons. After guest speaking one evening in a small town in Indiana, he is doing what he likes best - regaling his host, a modest Methodist preacher by the name of Pengilly, with story after story about the power and prestige of his own church.

"You see - oh, of course, I give 'em the straight old-time gospel in my sermon - I'm not the least afraid of talking right up to 'em and reminding them of the awful consequences of sin and ignorance and spiritual sloth. Yes sir! No blinking the horrors of the old-time proven hell, not in any church I'm running! But also we make 'em get together, and their pastor is just one of their chums, and we sing cheerful, comforting songs, and do they like it? Say! It shows up in the collection!"

"Mr. Gantry," said Andrew Pengilly, "why don't you believe in God?"

Lewis did not like public religion at all and in Elmer Gantry set up a straw man to vent his fury, but he also described fairly accurately a dynamic which is part of our culture. Before Elmer Gantry, Mark Twain wrote essays and humorous sketches reflecting his dislike of public piety. Twain was merciless, made fun of religious customs, had a running feud with Henry Ward Beecher, one of the most prominent clergy of the day, and often said that if heaven was like the church services he had attended - sour hymns, long-winded prayers, irrelevant sermons - he was rather glad he was going to hell.

Modern literature continues the fascination. John Updike's Month of Sundays is about a fallen minister and Graham Greene has written elegantly about an alcoholic priest in The Power and the Glory. The priest is itinerating from village to village in Mexico, saying mass, hearing confessions and baptizing babies. He will be well paid for the baptisms. He's sitting at a bar, drinking too much, calculating how many bottles he can buy with his baptism money. Greene writes:

"It was appalling how easily one forgot and went back. The brandy was musty on the tongue with his own corruption. God might forgive cowardice and passion, but was it possible to forgive the habit of piety?"

And so, for a period of time, we were mesmerized by the public revelations of a corrupt piety... as Sinclair Lewis' suspicions all came true. In a New Yorker article entitled "Reflections: Jim and Tammy," the author notes that it was one of the media events of the decade, more popular than Iran-Contra, even though the actual wrong doing was pallid by comparison with the flawed piety: mail and wire fraud and conspiracy. People were entranced by excesses and angry, including the judge, who virtually said that Bakker was more guilty - because his cover was piety - than other white collar criminals. "People seemed to be much more angry," the author observed, "at the Bakkers than they were with Leona Helmsley, Ivan Boesky, and all the perpetrators of the savings and loan scams combined." [New Yorker, 4/23/90, p. 48]

I'm not sure I understand it except that we are sensitive to the complexity of the topic of public piety and perhaps even ambiguous about our own feelings, which is, I conclude, about where the Bible would like us to be.

We have ordained and installed church officers this morning and over the years I have learned that when many Presbyterian church members are asked to be church officers, they say, "I don't think I'm religious enough." And when I pursue, I discover that what we're talking about is sterotypes, publicly invisible religious behavior... piety. Likewise, talking with couples who wish to be married, the pastor will often hear one of them say, "I'm not religious, but I believe in God and live a good life." "I'm not religious, but..." is a phrase you hear a lot in fact and the assumption is that being religious means certain publicly visible behavior.

Well, what does religion look like publicly? It is difficult to resist one of my favorite stories at this point, so I won't. An airliner, at cruise altitude suddenly lost one engine. The pilot came on the intercom to explain the situation. One of the passengers said, "Quick! Somebody do something religious!" And so the Baptists on board started to pray and the Methodists sang their favorite hymns and the Catholics reached for their rosaries, and a Presbyterian stood and started to take up an offering.

The time was that you could count on the Roman Catholics to know what religious behavior looks like. I knew from watching the Shaughnessy children that it meant cheese sandwiches at lunch on Friday and fish for dinner, confession on Saturday, mass on Sunday morning, a dirty forehead on Ash Wednesday and crossing yourself at the free-throw line. From my Baptist friends I knew that it meant going to church a lot, twice on Sunday, Wednesday night prayer meeting, carrying your own Bible, spending Sunday afternoon on the porch, playing Parcheesi instead of Pinnochle, Old Maid instead of Poker, and saying things like "Judas Priest" and "Holy Toledo" when you clearly meant something else.

My parents, good Presbyterians, took a dim view of all of it and reduced their wisdom on the topic to seven words which my father said often: "Don't wear your religion on your sleeve" - which I now know, is not far from something Jesus said one time:

"Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them."

Or, as the New English Bible bluntly translates:

"Be careful not to make a show of your religion."

One of the things a religion ought to do for you is tell you what religious behavior looks like. First century Judaism knew that religious behavior included alms giving. Jewish culture had developed a wonderful system of public and private charity. Alms was the money a religious person gave for the poor. Alms is the addition to the tithe, the return of one-tenth of one's possessions to the Lord. Jesus drew a picture of a very substantial contributor approaching the Synagogue with a bulging purse to make a special offering. The custom of publishing the amount of contributions goes back to the first century when names and amounts were announced at Synagogue, and on occasion, for special alms, trumpets were sounded. Obviously, if one was creative, one could arrange to enjoy a lot of public admiration. Now there is a subtle dimension to this - and a creative one. Eastern culture was not bashful about seeking public admiration. It used public admiration as a way to encourage and reinforce good behavior. It valued and rewarded generosity. Jesus was not criticizing that system. What he was proposing was a radical new way of being pious - shifting the focus of religion to the heart - where public attention is no longer an issue.

Judaism knew that religious behavior included prayer. As is still the case with Islam, the devout stopped what they were doing at nine, twelve and three, turned in the direction of the Temple and prayed. We have much to learn about a disciplined, regular life of prayer. But if one just happens to be on the corner of Michigan and Chestnut every day at prayer time, one will be rewarded by the admiration of others. That's all Jesus said: not that it's bad, just that it's playing to the gallery and it will be rewarded with applause.

Religion also included fasting once a year on the Day of Atonement for everybody, once or twice a week for the really devout. I sometimes muse over the fact that the only way apparently to lose weight is to approach the task with a religious commitment. I imagine God laughing over the fact that Jennie Craig and Weight Watchers have taught us something we failed to learn from 3,000 years of religious fasting. The custom on Atonement Day was to announce one's penitence by fasting and by rubbing ashes on one's cheek, wearing shabby clothes. Jesus suggests that if you are fasting for God's glory, you ought to anoint your face - as if you're going to a party.

Religious behavior - piety - is both the way we express how we feel to God... and it is also the way we announce to the world how we feel about

God. Going to church, therefore, is both an act of piety and a witness, a public testimony.

Piety, I like to think, is a way we respond to God's goodness. My personal, private religion, the prayers I say or think or meditate are the ways I live in relationship with God. Sometimes that means saying "thank you"; sometimes it means expressing a heartfelt hope, sometimes anger or disappointment and sometimes love. Piety is a way to say "I love you" to God.

Now humanize that dynamic for a moment. If you wish to say "I love you" to another human being you can hire a skywriter or spray paint it on the sidewalk... Sometimes in an outpouring of ecstatic, exuberant love we ought to make public affirmation. But if you tell the world about your love for your lover every day, he or she might wonder if your intended audience is not actually the world.

If you play to the gallery, you will be rewarded by the gallery. We are fascinated by corrupt piety, I think, because we know how complex our own motives are. We know that while some may be flagrant in their abuse of piety, the Elmer Gantrys, for instance, there is a sense in which to be human is to be unable not to think about the social implications of one's public behavior. Human motivations are complicated and our Reformed Tradition has always been skeptical about the possibility, this side of heaven, of total purity of motive.

Charles Lamb once wryly admitted: "The greatest pleasure I know is to do a good deed by stealth and to have it found out by accident."

The trouble with public piety in Jesus' day is that it becomes a poor substitute for authentic piety, which is private, but also a substitute for public faithfulness, to which Jesus very specifically calls his disciples and here's the rub.

In fact - in the same section of the Gospel According to Matthew, Jesus says, "You are the light of the world... Let your light so shine that the world will see your good works."

Jesus wanted private piety and public faithfulness, exactly the opposite from our inclination. His position, someone said, is very simple. "Show your religion when you are tempted to hide it. Hide your religion when you are tempted to show it."

Jesus would not understand a religion without a strong, disciplined piety. Nor, I think, would he understand a religion that had no public and political relevance. His uniqueness is that he insisted on both: prayer and social action; alms and public responsibility; fasting and justice.

He would not, I think, be impressed with a moment of silence for prayer at the beginning of the school day, mandated by law. He would care a lot about the quality of the education happening during the rest of the day and the public willingness to provide for it. He would not, I think,

be much impressed with the presence of his manger at the City Hall, or his cross on the government buildings. He would care a lot about compassion for the poor and justice for the oppressed.

The irony he taught, was that when public piety becomes a substitute for faithfulness and responsibility, the whole enterprise of religion is trivialized.

What he wanted, what he wants - are men and women who love him and his Kingdom enough to be naturally and personally grateful and devout and publicly faithful: men and women who know and attend to their own spirituality, but who have the grace and courage to be uncompromisingly public about his Kingdom, his values, his agenda for the world.

He promised that the combination of private piety and public faithfulness will do two things -

It will change the world... perhaps not dramatically, and perhaps not over night. But the world becomes a different place when Christ's women and men are publicly faithful.

And it will change us; we will be rewarded by God... not by public applause, but by the intimate, precious sense that we live in God's presence; that even when the struggle is hard and no one either understands or appreciates, there is one who will not let us fall - who himself never looked or acted religious. One who says... "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Amen.